

Motion 4

The Church of Ireland's response to the document, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, published by the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches (Faith & Order Paper No. 214)

The Church of Ireland welcomes the WCC Faith and Order Commission's document, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, recognising that it is the fruit of a committed, deep and sustained dialogue on issues of fundamental importance for the whole Church.

The report well reflects the stated primary purpose of the Commission itself, "to serve the churches as they call one another to visible unity in one faith and in one Eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and common life in Christ, through witness and service to the world, and advance towards that unity in order that the world may believe" (p. vii).

We note that the Commission has sent *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* to the Churches with the objective of assisting the processes of renewal in the Church and of theological agreement (p. viii) and we wholeheartedly endorse these objectives.

Aware of the depth of the ecumenical and theological engagement that lies behind *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, we recall that the Commission's 1982 report, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, was a similar major Faith and Order milestone that encouraged new steps on the Churches' common pilgrimage in search of the fullness of that unity which is God's gift and calling for the Church (*The Canberra Statement*, WCC Seventh Assembly, 1991).

BACKGROUND

The concluding 'Historical Note' section in *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* provides a very helpful oversight of the development of thinking and priorities within the Faith and Order movement since its first World Conference, in 1927. That history has led to this latest document with its emphasis on the theme of *koinonia*, which came to the fore at the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order in 1993 at Santiago de Compostela, and also following the further study of ecclesiology particularly reflected in Commission's report, *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, which was presented to the 2006 WCC Porto Alegre Assembly.

The Church: Towards a Common Vision describes itself as a "convergence text", that is, "a text which, while not expressing full consensus on all the issues considered, is much more than simply an instrument to stimulate further study" (p. 1). It is thus in status the successor to *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*.

LOOKING AHEAD

We see *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* as representing an effective statement of where the Churches currently find themselves on the journey of Faith and Order. It therefore presents an opportunity for reflection both on the journey so far and on possible directions for the future. To this extent, it is indeed more than a 'study document', allowing a time for serious reflection on the direction of the ecumenical journey into the years ahead.

As mentioned above, the World Conference on Faith and Order held in Santiago de Compostela in 1993 placed a characteristic stress on the theme of *koinonia*, communion, in understanding the nature of the Church itself. This signalled a more dynamic approach when compared with earlier models based on a more static, institutional concept of the Church. The theme of *koinonia* is rich in terms of highlighting relational dynamics and potentially allowing more space for ecclesial diversity itself, reflecting the diversity in the supremely relational and loving *koinonia* of the Holy Trinity (para 67, p. 39).

However, the Church, by virtue of being a considerable assembly of people, will always be an institution and will need structures in order to function effectively in the world (cf. *Report on Institutionalism*, Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order, 1963; Faith & Order Paper No. 37). Nonetheless, the Church must not be governed by an authoritarian or institutional mentality. As the Churches seek to be more faithful to Christ and his way, they will inevitably find themselves drawn more closely to one another.

Behind the whole process of the search for visible unity lies the operation of the Holy Spirit and, going forward, the Church is called to such a faithful following of the Spirit as *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* sees undoubtedly exemplified in Mary. (The document refers to Mary as 'the Mother of God', [para.15, pg 11], although we would prefer to render the term '*Theotokos*' more accurately as 'Mother of God incarnate', not least for the sake of clarity in interfaith dialogue, in which the title, 'Mother of God', is liable to be easily misunderstood.)

THE ORDAINED MINISTRY

Regarding the ordained ministry, we welcome the affirmation at para. 20: "Agreed statements are making it clear that the royal priesthood of the whole people of God (cf. 1 Pet. 2:9) and a special ordained ministry are both important aspects of the church, and not to be seen as mutually exclusive alternatives."

We also note the observation, in light of the challenges over issues relating to ordained ministry in ecumenical dialogue, that if differences such as those relating to the priesthood of the ordained prohibit full unity, overcoming those differences must be an urgent priority (p. 26, italicized note before para 46).

We would urge imagination and courage in taking creative steps of faith in this endeavour, for the sake of greater visible unity through reconciled ordained ministries.

AUTHORITY

We agree with the Commission that authority in the Church must be distinguished from "mere power" (paras. 49f, p. 28). The kind of authority which is exercised in the Church must reflect the kind of authority found in Christ whose authority was not based on office or position, but on the power of the truth itself.

We affirm with *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* that "service (*diakonia*) belongs to the

very being of the Church" (para 58, p. 33). Indeed, we would suggest that it lies at the heart of all authority in the Church.

However, the document seems to suggest that authoritative decisions in the Church are necessarily to achieve consensus: "Decision-making in the Church seeks and elicits the consensus of all and depends upon the guidance of the Holy Spirit, discerned in attentive listening to God's Word and to one another. By the process of active reception over time, the Spirit resolves possible ambiguities in decisions." (para 51, p. 28). Yet, we believe that the Church can err (Articles of Religion, 21) and that this refers to more than mere "ambiguities in decisions".

The Church: Towards a Common Vision raises the subject of the possibility of a form of universal primacy: "Partly because of the progress already recorded in bilateral and multilateral dialogues, the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order raised the question 'of a universal ministry of Christian unity'. In his encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*, Pope John Paul II quoted this text when he invited Church leaders and their theologians to 'enter into patient and fraternal dialogue' with him concerning this ministry." (para 56, p. 31)

The Church: Towards a Common Vision, we believe, is correct to indicate, in this connection, the importance of distinguishing "between the essence of a ministry of primacy and any particular ways in which it has been or is currently being exercised". Clearly, there are many issues to be addressed in relation to this subject.

THE CATHOLICITY OF THE CHURCH

Regarding the 'local' Church, we affirm the statement in *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*: "Each local church contains within it the fullness of what it is to be the Church. It is wholly Church, but not the whole Church."

Regarding the whole Church, among the greatest challenges which it faces today is the need to respond to changing cultural contexts and moral attitudes. We therefore recognise a serious challenge in the document's observation that *koinonia* "includes not only the confession of the one faith and celebration of common worship, but also shared moral values, based upon the inspiration and insights of the Gospel" (para 62, p. 35).

We affirm *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* when it indicates that the "essential catholicity of the Church is undermined when cultural and other differences are allowed to develop into division" (para 22, pg 14).

Regarding the use of the expression "Church as sacrament" (cf. para 27, p. 15), we understand what is meant - that is, that the Church is an effective sign of God's presence in the world - but we can also see that for various reasons others may find difficulty with the expression. It should therefore be used with ecumenical sensitivity.

We appreciate what *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* has to say about evangelization in the context of interfaith relations, in indicating that this should always be respectful of those who

hold other beliefs. It is appropriately stated that sharing the good news of Christ, and calling others to embrace that good news, is nothing less than “an expression of respectful love” (para 60, p. 34). This is an important aspect of the outreach of the whole Church with the one faith to the whole world.

QUESTIONS AND RESPONSES

Five particular questions have been addressed to the Churches in *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (p. 3) and, following our comments above, we now set out our responses to those specific questions in brief:

1. *To what extent does this text reflect the ecclesiological understanding of your church?*

The Church of Ireland finds its Anglican ecclesiological understanding well reflected in *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*.

2. *To what extent does this text offer a basis for growth in unity among the churches?*

The Church of Ireland considers that this will largely depend on how the various denominations receive the text but is of the view that *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* has considerable potential to deepen ecumenical life and thereby foster Christian unity.

3. *What adaptations or renewal in the life of your church does this statement challenge your church to work for?*

The Church of Ireland sees *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* as challenging it in various ways, including calling it to

- a deeper reflection, both as a denomination and ecumenically, on the document's broad themes;
- a clearer understanding of the limits of "legitimate" diversity in the Church (cf. p. 17, italicized section);
- new models of leadership and episcopate (cf p. 19, ad loc.);
- yet more prophetic witness in the world;
- the developing and resourcing of new approaches to mission (paras. 6f, p. 7; para 22, p. 14);
- more effective ways of dealing with divisions over moral issues; and
- a deeper dialogue with other Churches and faith communities in Ireland.

4. *How far is your church able to form closer relationships in life and mission with those churches which can acknowledge in a positive way the account of the Church described in this statement?*

The Church of Ireland is ready to explore all possibilities for closer relationships with Churches identifying with the thrust of *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*.

5. *What aspects of the life of the Church could call for further discussion and what advice could your church offer for the ongoing work by Faith and Order in the area of ecclesiology?*

Moral discernment and eucharistic sharing, in particular, are major issues in our current context that require special attention at this time. The Church of Ireland suggests that the Faith and Order Commission draws out the major themes emerging from the responses to *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* and focuses on these in the next phase of its work.